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THE WORLD'S MYSTERIOUS DOOM: SHELLEY'S *THE TRIUMPH OF LIFE*

BY JOHN A. HODGSON

I

As an unfinished poem, Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* simply does not allow of any final or complete interpretation. We cannot say with certainty how the poem would have ended, or even how long it would have been. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how Shelley could have gone on to deny the central truth of his vision and of Rousseau's narrative, that natural life ultimately corrupts and so triumphs over man's spirit. Perhaps he might have tried again, as he had already tried in *Adonais* and *Hellas,* to pursue an earthly hope beyond death and infer from it there a transcendent ideal, though his recognition in *The Triumph* that life itself thoroughly corrupts almost all men well before their deaths would seem to force even this path to a grimly restricted conclusion. But so far as the essence of life on earth is in question, the vision's answer is quite explicit, and thoroughly pessimistic.

Such pessimism about man's potential for fulfillment on earth is by no means a new strain in Shelley's thought. It had earlier appeared most strikingly in his Preface to *Alastor,* a work in many respects significantly evocative of *The Triumph.* In the second paragraph of that Preface, Shelley suddenly looked far beyond the matter of the poem, the failure of one misguided idealist, to envision a dark doom for all classes of men: "that Power which strikes the luminaries of the world with sudden darkness and extinction, by awakening them to too exquisite a perception of its influences, dooms to a slow and poisonous decay those meaner spirits that dare to abjure its dominion."[1] *The Triumph of Life* represents Shelley's affirmation of this foreboding in its entirety, coming after he had tried for seven years to escape or modify it.

In *The Triumph,* as in *Alastor, Prometheus Unbound,* and indeed all of Shelley's mature poetry, love is the great and ultimate Power in the universe, the changeless fact bespeaking the absolute. Rousseau firmly attests to love's might, by way

"Of him whom from the lowest depths of Hell

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Through every Paradise & through all glory
Love led serene, & who returned to tell

"In words of hate & awe the wondrous story
How all things are transfigured, except Love. . . ."[2]

But Rousseau's continuation is ominous:

"For deaf as is a sea which wrath makes hoary

"The world can hear not the sweet notes that move
The sphere whose light is melody to lovers. . . ."

(477-79)[3]

The world, that is, like a sea stirred into whiteness by a storm, so deafens itself with the roar of its own wrathful activity that it cannot hear the music of Venus' sphere, the cosmic song of love. As Jerome McGann notes of this passage, "Following upon his formulation of Dante's 'wonder' — that man must love to be saved — Rousseau's wonder affirms the inability of the world to love, hence to be saved."[4] Shelley's lines here recall two scenes in *Prometheus Unbound* following Jupiter's fall, as the earth prepares to renovate itself under the influence of love. In the first, immediately after that fall, Ocean is speaking to Apollo:

The loud deep calls me home even now to feed it
With azure calm out of the emerald urns
Which stand for ever full beside my throne.
. . . . . .
[Stage Direction: A sound of waves is heard]
It is the unpastured sea hungering for calm.
Peace, monster; I come now.

(III.ii. 41-50)

The second passage, part of the Earth's song in Act IV, takes up the same imagery and further develops it:

hate, and fear, and pain, light-vanquished shadows, fleeing,

Leave Man, who was a many-sided mirror,
Which could distort to many a shape of error,
This true fair world of things, a sea reflecting love;
Which over all his kind, as the sun's heaven
Gliding o'er ocean, smooth, serene, and even,
Darting from starry depths radiance and life, doth move. . . .

(IV. 381-87)

The Triumph of Life, as Rousseau's words suggest, presents quite the contrary situation, a turbulent world in which man distorts into

shapes of error the love he should truly reflect, an angry sea doomed ever to hunger for calm.

In what follows I shall investigate Shelley's vision of life in *The Triumph* first as it takes in the career of one questing individual — Rousseau, the last of Shelley's misguided natural pietist protagonists — and then as it encompasses all mankind. I shall postpone for a while the question of why Shelley chose Rousseau in particular for his protagonist; better to see first what kind of a man Rousseau thinks and shows himself to be in the poem, where he is, after all, not so much an historical as a visionary character. The narrator of the poem certainly knows who the historical Rousseau was, but still needs to ask the Rousseau of his vision, "Whence camest thou & wither goest thou? / How did thy course begin, . . . & why?' " (296-97), for the answers are obviously not mere biographical facts. I begin, then, with Rousseau's own account of " 'Whence I came, . . . / And how & by what paths I have been brought / To this dread pass' " (300-02).

II

Rousseau's story begins "In the April prime" (308), when, as he says, "I found myself asleep" (311) in a "valley of perpetual dream" (397) beside a mountain cavern, whence a rivulet was flowing with a "Lethean song" (463) that had effaced all his memories of any earlier time. Critics have differed widely over the significance of this scene, which is not only ambiguous to begin with but further complicated by the succeeding stages of Rousseau's visionary experience and by his recurrent loss of memory at each stage. Many critics have interpreted the scene as, in Carlos Baker's words, "a symbolic representation of Rousseau's birth"; most of these point for support to the poem's evocations of Wordsworth's allusions to birth in the *Intimations* Ode.[5] Harold Bloom disagrees significantly, reading the *Triumph* passage instead as "not . . . about the process of birth but about the process of 'growing up,' of passing from boyhood to manhood, or from that dependence on nature to a recognition that it is dangerous to depend on nature too much." Accordingly he relates the poem to Wordsworth's Ode in a way quite different from that of earlier critics: the passage, he says, is "a symbolic representation of that process of rebirth described by Wordsworth in the 'Intimations' ode, in which the poet passes from his initial vision into a time when vision ceases in its original sense, and another kind of vision may or may not succeed it."[6] Mediating between these two extremes, Reiman agrees with the former critics that "the symbolism clearly

depicts the birth of man," but then cautions that Rousseau's awakening is to be understood as an "awakening to self-consciousness" which "occurs some time after birth itself."[7] Edward Bostetter, aptly noting the dream nature of the episode, offers yet another interpretation: "Actually, all the imagery of the valley is 'Platonic' and suggests that the episode can most meaningfully be interpreted as a symbolic transportation of Rousseau into the ideal world of which he — and Shelley — had always dreamed."[8]

Here Bostetter adds a new and very important dimension to the argument over lines 308-35. Particularly salutary is his emphasis upon the visonary (as separable from the allegorical) quality of the episode. I would point out, however, that the vision as such is the narrator's only, not Rousseau's. Though both see the triumph proceeding through the valley, to Rousseau — himself, as we should never forget, a character in the narrator's vision and a participant in the triumph — the sight is not visionary, but actual. The several stages of experience and consciousness, which Rousseau is just beginning to recount in lines 308-35, the narrator, as a visionary, has been able to bypass. This fact makes it difficult to interpret Rousseau's awakening in the valley as an experience the narrator must also have shared, such as birth. It would seem rather to be an experience about which the narrator, without the mysterious agency of his vision, could know nothing.

These difficulties and many others lead me to propose a new interpretation of Rousseau's "autobiography" in *The Triumph of Life*. I would suggest that his sleep and rising in the valley represent not birth but death, and that the subsequent experiences he recounts represent his symbolic reenactment, after death, of his mortal life. In Rousseau's oblivious sleep, this is to say, we see the sleep of death itself; in his rising, we see an awakening in death from this initial sleep to the bright promise of an afterlife, inversely analogous to a babe's awakening to the bright promise of life; and in his ruinous integration into Life's triumph, we see finally his spirit's progressive corruption and disillusionment in this afterlife, paralleling the fate it had already suffered in life. Hazlitt was speaking truer than he knew, I think, and truer than any later critic has recognized, when he wrote, "The poem entitled the *Triumph of Life* is in fact a new and terrific Dance of Death . . ."[9]

This reading of *The Triumph,* while radically different from all earlier interpretations, finds both precedent and justification in Shelley's thought and work. In letters to Elizabeth Hitchener years

before, Shelley had supposed that just as the intellect or soul is suspended in dreamless sleep, so may it be in death, and that "in a future existence it will lose all consciousness of having formerly lived elsewhere, and will begin life anew, possibly under a shape of which we have now no idea."[10] And a few months previous he had expatiated on that "future state": "For the immoral 'never to be able to die, never to escape from some shrine as chilling as the clay-formed dungeon which it now inhabits' is the future punishment which I believe in."[11] To be sure, these were the half-formed opinions of an immature philosopher, and Shelley was soon to retreat from them into a skeptical epistemology.[12] Thereafter, he consistently acknowledged the impossibility of man's knowing anything about a future state. As C. E. Pulos has pointed out, however,

> Like every sceptic before him, Shelley cultivated a sceptical solution to doubt, even to the extent of expressing various degrees of assent to [affirmative] propositions regarding ultimate reality .... By overlooking their tentative character or conditional nature, we may confound these with otherwise similar affirmations in Coleridge or Wordsworth or Emerson; Shelley's affirmations, however, are not dogmatic intuitions but aspects of his sceptical solution to doubt.[13]

Shelley's second note to *Hellas,* to cite only a single, succinct example, bears out Pulos' assertions in every respect. Here Shelley, departing from his text, frankly proclaims his and all men's present ignorance of eschatological truth, but pleads, "meanwhile, as it is the province of the poet to attach himself to those ideas which exalt and ennoble humanity, let him be permitted to have conjectured the condition of that futurity towards which we are all impelled by an inextinguishable thirst for immortality."[14] But Shelley's conjectures about futurity were not, in this last year of his life, exclusively optimistic or affirmative. Even in *Hellas* a darker vision of life after death presents itself in the speech of the Phantom of Mahomet the Second to Mahmud:

> — Thou art slow, my son;
> The Anarchs of the world of darkness keep
> A throne for thee, round which thine empire lies
> Boundless and mute; and for thy subjects thou,
> Like us, shalt rule the ghosts of murdered life,
> The phantoms of the powers who rule thee now —
> Mutinous passions, and conflicting fears,
> And hopes that sate themselves on dust, and die! —
> Stripped of their mortal strength, as thou of thine.
>
> (878-86)

True to his skeptical principles, Shelley refused to make the Phantom "an ordinary ghost," preferring to represent it as a creature of Mahmud's confused and impassioned imagination.[15] But Mahmud's vision is nevertheless equally as valid as the Chorus' hopes, and opposes to their optimistic faith the implication "that one will still live after death in the mental world one has created for oneself in life."[16]

It does not seem unreasonable, then, to think that Shelley, as a fairminded skeptic, might in his poetry develop one kind of conjecture about futurity as easily as another. In *Hellas,* indeed, he does a little of both, with careful tentativeness in each case. In Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound,* he had already given his optimistic hopes free rein. And in Rousseau's "autobiography" in *The Triumph* he pursues, for the first and last time, the ramifications of a darker supposition.

The reading which I am proposing here, besides revealing and clarifying the general philosophical scheme of *The Triumph,* has further the immediate advantage of explaining aspects of the poem which other critics have perforce ignored or left unresolved. For example, no one, to my knowledge, has yet dealt satisfactorily with Rousseau's commentary on the "Oblivious melody" (341) produced by the stream's passage through the valley:

> "sound which all who hear must needs forget
> "All pleasure & all pain, all hate & love.
> Which they had known before that hour of rest:
> A sleeping mother then would not dream of
>
> "The only child who died upon her breast
> At eventide, a king would mourn no more
> The crown of which his brow was dispossest
>
> "When the sun lingered o'er the Ocean floor
> To gild his rival's new prosperity. —
> Thou wouldst forget thus vainly to deplore
>
> "Ills, which if ills, can find no cure from thee,
> The thought of which no other sleep will quell
> Nor other music blot from memory —
>
> "So sweet & deep is the oblivious spell. —"
>
> (318-31)

And the critical silence on this passage is understandable. For what relevance could references to a bereaved mother and a deposed king have to an awakening at birth, or even to a transition from boyhood to

manhood? How, if this oblivion be that accompanying birth, could Rousseau suggest that the narrator might yet undergo it; or why, if the passage is about growing up, should such oblivion be total? And why, in a poem which consistently associates the diurnal progress of the sun with the course of man's life, should this spell be one which succeeds sunset (325) and eventide (323)? But read as an extended allusion to death, Rousseau's commentary makes perfect sense throughout. Death as the healer of all ills and death as the grantor of oblivion are ancient and familiar concepts. The former, for example, appears throughout the works of the Greek tragedians, as in this fragment by Aeschylus: "O death, the healer, reject me not, but come! For thou alone are the mediciner of ills incurable, and no pain layeth hold on the dead."[17] The latter was an integral part of classical eschatology, fixed in the myth of the river Lethe, a draught of whose waters made the spirits of the dead forget their earthly life.[18] Thus when Rousseau goes on from talk of the stream's "Oblivious melody" (341) to speak of its "Lethean song" (463), he inevitably suggests the idea of death no less than that of oblivion.

A further point worth making is that the narrator's vision in *The Triumph of Life* encompasses the dead only, ranging from "The mighty phantoms of an elder day" (253) to "the spent vision of the times that were / And scarce have ceased to be" (233-34), the times of Frederick, Catherine, Leopold, Voltaire, Kant, and Napoleon. This not only accords with my reading of the poem as a vision of death, but also further illuminates its significant resemblance to Dante's *Commedia*, which like *The Triumph* is anagogically about life after death even while being allegorically about life on earth.

III

From this commentary on his sleep and rising Rousseau proceeds to his account of the "shape all light" (352), the greatest crux of the poem. She is not a figure to be quickly recognized and labelled, as the problems all critics have had with her amply demonstrate. Who she is and what she signifies we cannot hope to understand without first examining her station and effect in the poem; and this requires us to consider the larger context of her advent and waning.

Rousseau's experiences in the valley fall into three stages, divided from each other in his memory by waves of oblivion. The first stage he had slept through and cannot remember, but after rising could only sense through its afterglow:

"Whether my life had been before that sleep
The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell

"Like this harsh world in which I wake to weep,
I know not. I arose & for a space
The scene of woods & waters seemed to keep,

"Though it was now broad day, a gentle trace
Of light diviner than the common Sun
Sheds on the common Earth. . . ."

(332-39)

All memory but this "gentle trace" has been obliterated by the Lethean spell of the valley, a spell produced not only by the rivulet's song but also by "many sounds woven into one / Oblivious melody, confusing sense" (340-41), and by the shape herself:

"And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune
To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot
The thoughts of him who gazed on them, & soon

"All that was seemed as if it had been not,
As if the gazer's mind was strewn beneath
Her feet like embers, & she, thought by thought,

"Trampled its fires into the dust of death,
As Day upon the threshold of the east
Treads out the lamps of night, until the breath

"Of darkness reillumines even the least
Of heaven's living eyes — like day she came,
Making the night a dream. . . ."

(382-93)

The epithet "heaven's living eyes" and the careful parallels established tropically here between the blotting of Rousseau's memory and the coming of day to the valley indicate that the "light diviner than the common Sun" which seems to be lingering around him when he first awakes is the light of the nighttime sky. Similarly, as the images in this last passage make clear, the faint, residual memories of that earlier period shine in Rousseau's mind like stars in the pre-dawn sky, and the shape extinguishes them as the dawn does the starlight — darkening the mind, as Rousseau significantly adds in another figure, "into the dust of death."

The second stage of Rousseau's experience in the valley, the period during which the "shape all light" is present to him, begins with his rising and ends when he drinks from the shape's cup of nepenthe. While he intuitively associates the first period with night and starlight, this succeeding time he identifies with the dawn,

when the sun rises while the morning star wanes. He first sees the spirit of this time and place as "A shape all light, which with one hand did fling / Dew on the earth, as if she were the Dawn" (352-53), and later likens her to "dewy morning" (402). As we have already seen, she extinguishes his earlier memories as the dawn does the starlight. She appears with the coming of the sun (343-52), but she also, when she disappears, fades into the stronger light of the new vision as does the morning star into the light of day:

> "And the fair shape waned in the coming light
> As veil by veil the silent splendour drops
> From Lucifer, amid the chrysolite
>
> "Of sunrise ere it strike the mountain tops. . . ."
>
> (412-15)

For a while thereafter, Rousseau can still sense her invisible presence, "unseen" but "felt" (417), even as after his first rising in the valley he could still sense "a gentle trace / Of light diviner than the common Sun."

Shelley's extensive simile here bears quoting in its entirety:

> "And as the presence of that fairest planet
> Although unseen is felt by one who hopes
>
> "That his day's path may end as he began it
> In that star's smile, whose light is like the scent
> Of a jonquil when evening breezes fan it,
>
> "Or the soft note in which his dear lament
> The Brescian shepherd breathes, or the caress
> That turned his weary slumber to content. —
>
> "So knew I in that light's severe excess
> The presence of that shape which on the stream
> Moved, as I moved along the wilderness,
>
> "More dimly than a day appearing dream,
> The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep,
> A light from Heaven whose half extinguished beam
>
> "Through the sick day in which we wake to weep
> Glimmers, forever sought, forever lost. —
> So did that shape its obscure tenor keep
>
> "Beside my path, as silent as a ghost. . . ."
>
> (416-33)

Like lines 318-31, this is a passage which has never been adequately explained. All turns upon Rousseau's likening of the waned shape to Lucifer, the morning star, whose light is so pleasing and soothing —

likening her, that is, to Venus, "The sphere whose light is melody to lovers." Though the "shape all light" is extinguished by the greater light of Life's chariot just as is Lucifer by the sun, Rousseau senses at first that her unseen presence continues beside him just as Lucifer remains invisibly present in the morning sky. And like "one who hopes / That his day's path may end as he began it / In that star's smile," Rousseau hopes that, once the extinguishing brightness of the chariot has passed, he will again be able to see the "shape all light," and draw comfort from her after the wearisome harshness of life even as the shepherd draws comfort from the evening star.[19] But — and this is the bitter irony of the passage — *no one* who begins his day in the light of that star's smile can ever so end it. When Venus is a morning star it is never — cannot be — an evening star also, but sets invisibly sometime during the afternoon. And though the shape may at first be moving invisibly down the stream beside Rousseau, it can hardly so accompany him when he follows Life's chariot up "The opposing steep of that mysterious dell" (470). His hope ultimately to regain his vision of her, then, is simply fond and delusive; having once faded away, she is now, as he secretly knows, "forever lost" (431).

If we now recall, however, that the poem represents Rousseau as here recounting his hopes, not in life, but in death, which symbolically reenacts and mirrors life, a still deeper import emerges. This new layer of meaning is perhaps best brought out by Shelley's 1821 translation of the Platonic epigram which, in its Greek form, he had used as an epigraph for *Adonais:*

> Thou wert the morning star among the living,
> Ere thy fair light had fled; —
> Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving
> New splendour to the dead.

The Greek epigram addresses a youth named Aster, hence its play on the word "star." But more importantly, the epigram associates the world's passage from the light of Lucifer to that of Hesperus with the soul's passage from one realm to another, from life to death. Here again we find the suggestion that death is the image of life. Lucifer passes to Hesperus as does life to death; the change, for man as for Venus, is one not of essence but of phase. The path of a man's day, then, may indeed "end as he began it / In that star's smile" — but only if it ends in the mirror-land of death.[19a]

The third stage of Rousseau's experiences begins with his tasting of the nepenthe and his resulting sudden vision of the triumph of

Life. Just as an afterglow of starlight momentarily remains for him after the Lethean spell of his sleep has extinguished all other memory of the night, so now, as we have just observed, a faint afterimage of the shape, rather sensed than seen, momentarily remains after he has drunk the nepenthe and the new vision bursts upon his sight. And as the first stage was associated with the night and the second with the dawn, so accordingly is this third stage with the day. The chariot blots Rousseau's vision of the shape as the sun does the morning star, reducing her to the semblance of "a day appearing dream" sensed now "Through the sick day in which we wake to weep"; it also lights its captive crew "like atomies . . . / Within a sunbeam" (446-47), as the pageant progresses from morn to night (193-95). Further, it creates from these captives shadowy phantoms of thoughts, "As the sun shapes the clouds" (535), peopling the air around it

> "with dim forms, as when there hovers
>
> "A flock of vampire-bats before the glare
> Of the tropic sun, bringing ere evening
> Strange night upon some Indian isle. . . ."
>
> (483-86)

This ominous image points up the ultimate horror of Shelley's vision — its assertion that Life evokes from men vampiric, self-destructive thoughts and passions which will doom them to an unnatural night, eclipsing whatever natural or divine light might otherwise have been anticipated from the natural twilight or the reillumined eyes of heaven.[20]

Rousseau's narrative further suggests that the three stages of his experiences in the valley progressively resemble the states of dead or dreamless sleep, dreaming, and waking. Of the first, unremembered period of his presence in the valley all he can say with certainty is that he had been then obliviously, dreamlessly asleep. It is noteworthy that he begins his account not by telling of his awakening in the valley, but rather by saying, "I found myself asleep" (311). After rising (not waking) from his sleep (335), he finds himself in what he can only describe as a dream-world, whose genius is a dream-shape. She moves along the water "As one enamoured is upborne in dream" (367), comes toward him like day, "Making the night a dream" (393), and finally disappears from him like "a day appearing dream, / The ghost of a forgotten form of sleep" (427-28). Rousseau himself thinks of her as one who "comest from the realm without a name, / Into this valley of perpetual dream" (396-97). After

drinking the nepenthe, however, Rousseau is no longer in this dream-world; he has now awakened, ultimately "to weep," in this "sick day" and "harsh world" of life (334, 430).

These linked progressions of night, dawn, day; sleep, dream, waking are highly evocative of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," where the same basic patterns appear. "Our birth," as Wordsworth there observes,

> is but a sleep and a forgetting:
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting,
> And cometh from afar. . . .
>
> (58-61)

And the Child's early life is like a dawn and a dream: he enters life "trailing clouds of glory" from the east of his birth (64-74), whence his aging enforces a continuous westering of the spirit towards its setting (cf. 196), and his early years "seem / Apparelled in celestial light, / The glory and the freshness of a dream" (3-5; cf. 57, 91). Finally, as he grows into maturity, "the Man perceives [the visionary gleam] die away, / And fade into the light of common day" (75-76); thus the dream fades into waking.[21]

Shelley further follows Wordsworth in making the period of dawn and dream a time of joyous sensitivity to the beauties of nature. For the newly risen Rousseau,

> "The scene of woods & waters seemed to keep,
>
> "Though it was now broad day, a gentle trace
> Of light diviner than the common Sun
> Sheds on the common Earth,"
>
> (336-39)

just as to the young Wordsworth

> meadow, grove, and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparelled in celestial light. . . .
>
> (1-4)

And for Rousseau, as for Wordsworth, once the glorious dawn fades into the light of common day the beauties of nature seem less pleasing: now, Rousseau admits, neither "sweetest flowers" nor "the falling stream's Lethean song" can hold his attention (461, 463), while Wordsworth similarly acknowledges that "the radiance which

was once so bright" is "now forever taken from my sight," and "nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower" (176-79).[22]

As the many verbal, metaphorical, and structural parallels between these sections of the two poems make obvious, Shelley is demanding that his *Triumph* be read in relation to Wordsworth's Ode. I have already alluded briefly to the ideas of various critics as to what exactly this relationship might be (see above, p. 445 and n. 29). None of these interpreters, I should note, has seen in *The Triumph* more than a passing allusion to the Ode. But certainly the connections are quite extensive. Rousseau's narrative seems to be describing a pattern of growth directly analogous to that which Wordsworth reviews in his Ode. In *The Triumph*, however, this process is entirely symbolic, occurring as it does in Rousseau's afterlife. Thus Shelley's *Triumph* relates to Wordsworth's *Intimations* Ode not only as a symbolic parallel, but also as an eschatological inversion.

Rousseau additionally suggests and elaborates on the partite nature of his experiences in an extended simile for which no other images of the poem have prepared us. At the shape's bidding he sips from her cup of nepenthe:

> "And suddenly my brain became as sand
>
> "Where the first wave had more than half erased
> The track of deer on desert Labrador,
> Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed
>
> "Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore
> Until the second bursts — so on my sight
> Burst a new Vision never seen before."
>
> (405-11)

Only two critics have tried seriously to deal with this passage. Peter Butter, partly reading it in the light of related images elsewhere in Shelley's poetry, finds the deer suggestive of gentleness and beauty, the wolf, of desire and savagery.[23] Donald Reiman, revising these readings somewhat, claims for the simile an optimistic quality which I do not think it actually possesses:

> [Rousseau's] brain became as a sandy beach where the wave of his vision had "more than half erased" the track of deer, symbols of innocence, and where the wolf of evil "leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore" until a second wave bursts. Although that "second" never appears to wash away the wolf's track within "The Triumph," this simile . . . carries within it the seed of an optimistic solution to the problem of evil posed by the poem, for it implies

> that Rousseau's vision of evil has distorted his perspective, erasing the marks of good but leaving the marks of evil until still another wave, another moment in the constant flux of human experience and knowledge, rectifies the picture.[24]

Surely prompted by Rousseau's repetition of the word "burst," Reiman here interprets the wave of Rousseau's simile as imaging his vision. But such a reading is awkward; for the vision does not depart like a wave, rather it breaks suddenly upon Rousseau's consciousness and remains there. The wave itself represents not the vision as a whole, then, but the sudden coming of the vision, and simultaneously the obliterating power that erases all but a trace of what had passed or been thought before — that is, it represents the drink of nepenthe. The deer, certainly suggestive of beauty and innocence, belong to the paradisiac world of dreams Rousseau has just lost. As with the "shape all light," only a slight vestige of their presence remains after the vision of Life suddenly overwhelms Rousseau's mind. The wolf, on the other hand, is a creature of the wilderness of Life. Fierce pursuit of the deer is its self-expression and proper function, which "desire" and "savagery" explicate quite satisfactorily in the present context. "Evil," however, while correct, by too readily connoting a supernatural power perhaps obscures the naturalness of the implied scene.

Reiman claims that "Rousseau's vision of evil had distorted his perspective." The poem, however, suggests quite the opposite, that Rousseau's vision of Life has corrected his perspective, however unpleasantly. Before this new vision, he had not even been aware that the wolf existed. Now he not only realizes this all-important truth, but also can understand why the deer have fled.

IV

We are ready now to look more closely at the shape's offering to Rousseau, her cup of nepenthe. Of the numerous sources and analogues which commentators have suggested, two in particular seem directly illuminating. One is Milton's *Comus*, wherein the bright potion which Comus offers to travelers promises to be as beneficent as Helen's true nepenthe (671-77; cf. *Odyssey* IV. 222ff) but proves as corruptive as Circe's drug (cf. *Odyssey* x.237ff): when men taste it,

> (For most do taste through fond intemperate thirst)
> Soon as the Potion works, their human count'nance,
> Th' express resemblance of the gods, is chang'd

Into some brutish form of Wolf, or Bear,
Or Ounce, or Tiger, Hog, or bearded Goat,
All other parts remaining as they were.

(66-72)

It is from this passage of *Comus* that the ominousness of Rousseau's account derives its first strength.[25] The potion's power to transform men's countenances allows for spectacular costuming effects in a masque, but is essentially of only secondary significance here. More significant is that these men in all other parts remain as they were — within as well as without; and what they are within, their new faces better than their old express. Comus, that is, with his potion turns men into the very beasts their own lusts and savagery have already inwardly made them.[26] Something of the same nature happens, I shall be suggesting, when the "shape all light" administers her nepenthe.

Another significant parallel to the shape's nepenthe comes from Shelley himself, who used in *Prometheus Unbound*, as Stawell first noted, the phrase, "the nepenthe, love" (III.iv.163).[27] Bloom calls her reference to the phrase gratuitous with some reason, for certainly she makes gratuitous use of it.[28] Seen in its larger context, however, the phrase does indeed seem to illuminate Shelley's recurrence to nepenthe in *The Triumph*. In the speech from which the following lines are excerpted, the Spirit of the Hour is reporting to Prometheus and others what changes have taken place on earth as a result of Jupiter's fall:

hate, disdain, or fear,
Self-love or self-contempt, on human brows
No more inscribed, as o'er the gate of hell,
"All hope abandon ye who enter here";
. . . . . .
None, with firm sneer, trod out in his own heart
The sparks of love and hope till there remained
Those bitter ashes, a soul self-consumed,
And the wretch crept a vampire among men,
Infecting all with his own hideous ill;[29]
. . . . . .
. . . nor pride,
Nor jealousy, nor envy, nor ill shame,
The bitterest of those drops of treasured gall,
Spoilt the sweet taste of the nepenthe, love.

(III.iv.133-63)

The Spirit is here describing pure love in a renewed, paradisiac world as an untainted nepenthe; but at the same time he is implicitly

acknowledging that in a fallen world the drug will be correspondingly impure, tainted by the bitter additives which spoil ordinary, mortal love — pride, jealousy, envy, ill shame. Knowing something of the historical Rousseau and his world, we may well, if we read *The Triumph* in the light of this passage, mistrust the sweetness and purity of the nepenthe he drinks. Even within the poem we can find evidence of Rousseau's "treasured gall"; consider how, when the shape approached, he reacted "as one between desire and shame / Suspended" (394-95). Why shame? And what kind of desire? What Rousseau has to suggest of these passions elsewhere in his account hardly encourages us to read noble meanings into them when they appear here. Later he is to describe how, as the pageant advanced, "in the eyes where once hope shone / Desire like a lioness bereft / Of its last cub, glared ere it died" (524-26).[30] And he had already said of himself to the narrator,

> "if the spark with which Heaven lit my spirit
> Earth had with purer nutriment supplied
>
> "Corruption would not now thus much inherit
> Of what was once Rousseau — nor this disguise
> Stained that within which still disdains to wear it. —"
> (201-05)

The desire and shame which he attributes to himself, then, denote vices or weaknesses of his own character. Further, by reason of the peculiar status of his experiences as a reenactment after death of life, we can read "Earth" here to mean not only the animal side of his nature or even the influences of his environment, but, inclusively, his life on earth.

I would suggest, then, that the nepenthe which Rousseau drinks is to be associated not simply with the "shape all light" but with the shape as he reacts to her, a provocation to desire and shame; and that the thirst he drinks to slake is the thirst he had spent his mortal life trying to satisfy. The nepenthe — we may, I think, understand it to represent love, since the shape suggests Venus (by the way of the morning star), and all the more because Rousseau confesses, "I was overcome / By my own heart alone" (240-41) — contains bitter impurities, as he finds, but they are impurities which Rousseau himself had in his life mixed into it. Like Comus' potion, the nepenthe possesses a corruptive power, but can work its effect only insofar as he who drinks is already corrupt. The shape's crystal cup contains both the liquor which might have saved him and the poisons with which he destroyed himself.

V

By now, I think, the apparently ambiguous nature of the "shape all light" has already become fairly intelligible. It is helpful, however, to recognize through what specific comparisons and contrasts Shelley establishes her significance. I have already observed that in likening her waning to that of Lucifer, the morning star, Rousseau is in effect associating her with Venus. Beyond this, two other pointed allusions seem worthy of note.

The first and more important of these is to Matilda in Dante's *Purgatorio* xxviii-xxix, an allusion which Bradley was the first to note and Bloom the first to interpret meaningfully.[31] Dante, in *la divina foresta* of the Earthly Paradise, comes to a stream, Lethe, whose opposite bank bears a multitude of flowers. There he suddenly sees a "bright lady,"[32] Matilda, gathering flowers. As they move along the stream which separates them, suddenly a light flashes and waxes, and the bright Triumphal Car of the Church enters. Bloom goes beyond noting the parallels of scene between this and Rousseau's "valley of perpetual dream" to read Rousseau's meeting with the shape as a "diabolic parody" of Dante's with Matilda.[33] "Diabolic" I cannot agree with, for reasons which my argument in the preceding section must already have made obvious; but that Shelley's scene presents at least a dark parallel to Dante's is hardly disputable.

The darker implications of Shelley's presentation, already suggested by the shape's association with Comus, are further established by another parallel which no previous critic seems to have noted. As I pointed out earlier, the shape first appears to Rousseau "as if she were the Dawn" or the "Day upon the threshold of the east" (353, 389). Now Eos (Latin "Aurora"), the Greek personification of dawn, out of love several times carried off beautiful youths such as Orion, Cephalus, and Tithonus, to their ultimate ill fortune. Shelley does not extend the analogy; still, perhaps we should sense this vague threat, as well as other appropriate and more pleasing attributes, latent in the shape's likeness to the Dawn.

How, then, are we to understand the "shape all light"? We should remember first of all that she is a dream-creature, and as such a figure both ethereal and ideal. In death's symbolic reenactment of life her place is in the realm of dreams before waking; in life, in the realm of childish innocence. Her complicity in the erasing of Rousseau's earlier memories is not in itself ominous; for this represents simply the effect of birth upon man's memories of pre-existence. Moreover, she herself, coming to him from that "realm without a name" (396),

represents and effectively substitutes on this side of birth for that intuited earlier glory.

The "shape all light," then, is not in herself a sinister figure, but quite the contrary. She represents the ideal of love and beauty which each man may and ought to seek. Insofar as the drink she offers Rousseau is sinister, gall rather than nepenthe, this is because he in his life had made it so by compromising his ideal, just as he compromises now by selfishly desiring her instead of selflessly loving her, as Dante did Matilda: her potion is of his own mixing. "The spark with which Heaven lit my spirit" (201) finds its proper nutriment in love. The corrupting impurities come not from Heaven but from Earth, not from love but from desire, self-love, self-disdain, envy, fear, or ill shame.

It becomes necessary now to confront the quite different implications of a parallel which I have previously emphasized, that between the experiences of Rousseau in this poem and those of Wordsworth in the *Intimations* Ode. That parallel, if extended to this stage of Rousseau's vision, would suggest that the "shape all light" is Nature.[34] But here, I must insist, Shelley diverged from Wordsworth; and his divergence offers a clue as to why he made Rousseau (rather than Wordsworth, for example) the protagonist of *The Triumph.*

As early as "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth had expressed his youthful love of nature in terms of sexual attraction, thereby implicitly imaging Nature herself as a sexual partner:

> For nature then
> (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
> And their glad animal movements all gone by)
> To me was all in all. — I cannot paint
> What then I was. The sounding cataract
> Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to me
> An appetite; a feeling and a love,
> That had no need for a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, nor any interest
> Unborrowed from the eye.
>
> (72-83)

But the "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" (84-85) of this time passed; and the somewhat older Wordsworth, though "still / A lover of the meadows and the woods, / And mountains" (102-04), came to see nature, or at least to address her, as a maternal figure, "the nurse,

/ The guide, the guardian of my heart" (109-10). This is precisely how he portrays her in the *Intimations* Ode:

> Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
> Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
> And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
> And no unworthy aim,
> The homely Nurse doth all she can
> To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
> Forget the glories he hath known,
> And that imperial palace whence he came.
>
> (77-84)

Now, Shelley's "shape all light" is indeed a glorious nature-figure, as lines 343-81 make clear, but she is certainly no homely nurse or mother. Dancing like an enamored dreamer (367ff), arousing Rousseau's desire, evoking comparison with Venus, Eos, and Matilda, she is a creature of great beauty and seductiveness, and as such represents Shelley's repudiation of what he took to be Wordsworth's imaginational evasiveness and apostasy. Shelley was not afraid, as Wordsworth perhaps was, to acknowledge the full metaphorical implications of being a lover of nature. For Shelley, love of nature, love of woman, and love of what he termed Intellectual Beauty were quite extensively analogous, and his insistence upon these analogies informs much of his finest poetry — including "Hymn to Intellectual Beaty," *Prometheus Unbound*, and *Epipsychidion*, to name only a few prominent examples. But while these three loves were thus closely related, by no means were they identical, and the love of Intellectual Beauty was immeasurably the most important; so, correspondingly, was its abuse immeasurably the most dangerous and destructive. Wordsworth, as Shelley read him, had carefully skirted this fundamental issue and analogy, not only in his poetry but in his life as well.[35] And the same evasiveness of this point which made the *Intimations* Ode an inadequate and misleading account of man's spiritual progress through life also made Wordsworth inadequate as a protagonist for Shelley's corrective response. Thus not Wordsworth or anyone like him, but Rousseau, the famous lover of nature and infamous lover of women, became Shelley's guide in *The Triumph of Life*.

Rousseau receives the nepenthe in response to the request he makes of the shape. "Show whence I came, and where I am, and why" (398), he asks, to which she replies, "Arise, and quench thy thirst" (400). He drinks, and suddenly his brain becomes like sand whereon the new vision of Life imprints itself. Here we find Shelley

making use of a pun naturally implicit in the English idioms according to which water quenches both thirst and fire: in quenching his thirst for such knowledge, Rousseau is also quenching the heavenly spark of his spirit.[36] And that the vision of Life does answer his questions is bitterly obvious: life is whence Rousseau came; the triumph of Life, death's reenactment of life's choices, is where he is now; and he is here because he was there, a captive of life because, when living, he had surrendered to her.

In a very real and important sense, Shelley with *The Triumph of Life* returns full circle to the view of life he had expressed in *Alastor* and its Preface. Both poems tell how "The spirit of sweet human love" sends a vision to "him who spurned / Her choicest gifts" (*Alastor*, 203-05). In the earlier poem, this punitive — because delusive — vision takes the form of a desirable dream-maiden, while in the later the spirit herself is this dream-maiden, and the punitive — now, because retrospective — vision, a clear insight into the nature of earthly life. In spite of such inversions, however, Rousseau and the *Alastor*-Poet reveal their essential similarity to one another by similarly perverting their imaginations, which should be the factors of selfless love, to the interests of selfishness. Though the *Alastor*-Poet seeks solitude while Rousseau's contrary impulse is to plunge "among / The thickest billows of the living storm" of humanity (465-66), each errs, and so abuses the gifts of life and imagination, by neglecting to attune his heart to love, its proper object. This is the gist of Rousseau's confession that

> "I was overcome
> By my own heart alone, which neither age
> "Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb
> Could temper to its object."
>
> (240-43)

Once "temper" here is understood in its quite valid and appropriate sense of "attune," the passage ceases to be the problem critics have long thought it.[37] The heart requires such attuning because it has its passions, wayward and selfish until the imagination direct and educate them. Rousseau's victimization beyond the grave, and the *Alastor*-Poet's on this side of it, indicate how their imaginations have failed them.

VI

Just as Shelley blames Rousseau and the *Alastor*-Poet for similar failings, so in *The Triumph* as a whole does he visualize for all men

the doom he had forecast in his Preface to the earlier poem. In *Alastor*, the assertion of this fate comes as something of an afterthought; in *The Triumph*, however, it comprises both the beginning and ending of his vision as we have it, casting over the whole a shadow of the deepest pessimism and gloom.

Certainly the number of Life's victims is dishearteningly huge. Among the captive multitude are

> all those who had grown old in power
> Or misery, — all who have their age subdued,
>
> By action or by suffering, and whose hour
> Was drained to its last sand in weal or woe,
> So that the trunk survived both fruit & flower;
>
> All those whose fame or infamy must grow
> Till the great winter lay the form & name
> Of their own earth with them forever low. . . .
>
> (120-27)

Among these it is noteworthy that an eminent captive of a spirit quite opposite to Rousseau's proves to be his nearest fellow in corruption:

> "All that is mortal of great Plato there
> Expiates the joy & woe his master knew not;
> That star that ruled his doom was far too fair —
>
> "And Life, where long that flower of Heaven grew not,
> Conquered the heart by love which gold or pain
> Or age or sloth or slavery could subdue not. . . ."
>
> (254-59)

These lines, as Bradley has shown, refer obscurely to the tradition that Plato in his old age became enamored of a youth named Aster (the word also means "star" and the familiar flower).[38] Plato's "master," Socrates, on the other hand, kept his eye steadily on the beauty of love itself, as his speech and Alcibiades' anecdotes in the *Symposium* amply indicate, and could not be enticed by the lesser, physical beauties of any individual. So Plato, the great teacher and mythographer of the transcendental ideal, inconsistently and ironically fell victim at last to the same corruption that mastered Rousseau, the great apostle of natural piety.[39]

It is needless to discuss, case by case or even type by type, the various kinds of men who appear as Life's victims in *The Triumph*. As the passage quoted above (120-27) and the examples of Plato and Rousseau indicate, the captive multitude is not limited to the despots, hypocrites, and opportunists we might expect to find in it.

Rather it contains both sufferers and tyrants, the famous and the infamous alike. Chained to the car of Life are philosophers, benevolent despots, and religious leaders. Here too are "the great bards of old" (in an earlier version Shelley names "Homer & his brethren"), apparently victims of Life because they glorified man's passions. Rousseau suggests an interesting contrast between them and himself:

> "See the great bards of old who inly quelled
> "The passions which they sung, as by their strain
> May well be known: their living melody
> Tempers its own contagion to the vein
> "Of those who are infected with it — I
> Have suffered what I wrote, or viler pain! —
> "And so my words were seeds of misery. . . ."
>
> (274-80)

I take this to mean that the classical poets, who in themselves mastered the passions of which they sang, could evoke the emotions of passional joy and suffering only in those who had already experienced them, while Rousseau, a more "contagious" writer because he gave his passions free rein, could induce passion and suffering in his readers where none had been before.[40]

Shelley's most fundamental statement of why almost all men fall victim to Life comes early in Rousseau's commentary on the pageant:

> "And who are those chained to the car?" "The Wise,
> "The great, the unforgotten: they who wore
> Mitres & helms & crowns, or wreathes of light,
> Signs of thought's empire over thought; their lore
> "Taught them not this — to know themselves; their might
> Could not repress the mutiny within,
> And for the morn of truth they feigned, deep night
> "Caught them ere evening."
>
> (208-15)

A man must first know himself, in accordance with the Delphic admonition, if he would "forbear / To join the dance" of Life (188-89). But even the wise and the great have not attained to this self-knowledge. They failed to repress "the mutiny within" because they did not recognize it for what it was. Readily responding to Life's "savage music" (142), they entered into and were caught up in the

common dance celebrating Life's pageant. Only then, too late, did they find that, "Convulsed & on the rapid whirlwinds spun / Of that fierce spirit, whose unholy leisure / Was soothed by mischief since the world begun" (144-46), the celebrants of this pageant are ultimately sucked into its deadly center, there to become its newest victims. The saving self-knowledge they never acquired would have helped them to distinguish what in man is good and conducts to good from what is degrading, and so taught them to forbear yielding to their selfish physical, intellectual, or even spiritual passions.

Only the few exceptional men who remained true to their own heavenly spirits in spite of earth's mutinous impulses do not appear in the triumph. Their examples, however, no less than their rarity offer mankind but scant hope for personal fulfillment, and none at all for life:

> All but the sacred few who could not tame
> Their spirits to the Conqueror, but as soon
> As they had touched the world with living flame
>
> Fled back like eagles to their native noon,
> Or those who put aside the diadem
> Of earthly thrones or gems, till the last one
>
> Were there; — for they of Athens & Jerusalem
> Were neither mid the mighty captives seen
> Nor mid the ribald crowd that followed them
>
> Or fled before.
>
> (128-37)

Two kinds of men, these lines are saying, escape being corrupted by life. The first comprises those who die before what Shelley once referred to as "the world's slow stain" soils them. This group may well, as *Adonais* cannot but remind us, include the likes of Lucan, Sidney, Chatterton, and Keats — not, however, as "The inheritors of unfulfilled renown" the earlier poem would have them be, but only as men whose good sense or good fortune it was to die young.[41] Early death preserves the "living flame" with which heaven lit their spirits from the corrupting nutriments of earthly life.

In the second group of the uncorrupted stand those, including Socrates and Christ, who endured life without falling victim to it, surviving unstained by virtue of their supreme indifference to worldly concerns. Notwithstanding his familiar moral self-righteousness, Shelley made no pretenses to being of this number. "Alas," he wrote Leigh Hunt not three months before the *Don Juan* foundered, "how am I fallen from the boasted purity in which you

knew me once exulting!"[42] "They of Athens & Jerusalem," as Shelley uses the phrase here, implies, I think, that Socrates and Christ alone among men were able to live in the world without ever being to the slightest degree of it.[43] Even such a one as Plato, we should remember, through a single lapse in his old age betrayed himself to the Conqueror, and now walks chained to the triumphal car.

Man's only hopes for remaining uncorrupted by life, then, lie in early death or near-impossible self-possession — which is as much to say, at least to anyone past adolescence, that there is no such hope whatever. Such a conclusion necessarily engenders the most fatalistic pessimism:

> much I grieved to think how power & will
> In opposition rule our mortal day —
>
> And why God made irreconcilable
> Good & the means of good; and for despair
> I half disdained mine eye's desire to fill
>
> With the spent vision of the times that were
> And scarce have ceased to be.
>
> (228-34)

The world's "mysterious doom" (244) is just this: that "Good & the means of good" should prove to be incompatible. To grasp the full import of this despairing dilemma, doubly crushing to a poet of Shelley's philosophical persuasion, we must recall his words on moral good in the "Defence of Poetry":

> The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. . . .[44]

The irreconcilables of life, good and the means of good, are precisely the forces which Shelley had striven all his life to reconcile, the forces whose unity his millenial and apocalyptic vision in *Prometheus Unbound* had seen renewing the world and harmonizing the universe: love and imagination. In *Adonais* he had already sensed this black truth:

> When lofty thought
> Lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,
> And love and life contend in it, for what
> Shall be its earthly doom, the dead live there. . . .
>
> (392-95)

The contention of life and love too easily becomes one of life and death. The imagination belongs properly to love; but everywhere it is perverted from its great purpose, and from love betrays man to life. The triumph of life is the failure of the imagination.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1905; rpt. 1967), p. 15. Hereafter cited as *P. W.* All quotations from Shelley's poetry (excluding *The Triumph of Life*) and his notes and prefaces to poems refer to this edition.

[2] Ll. 472-76. All quotations from *The Triumph of Life* refer to the text established by Donald H. Reiman, *Shelley's "The Triumph of Life": A Critical Study*, Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 55 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

[3] L. 479 refers to "the Third Heaven, that of Venus . . . according to the astronomy followed by Dante" (A. C. Bradley, "Notes on Shelley's 'Triumph of Life'," *Modern Language Review*, 9 [1914], 445). Bradley observes that Shelley's immediate reference is to the first Canzone of the *Convivio*, which Shelley translated (see *P. W.*, p. 726).

[4] Jerome J. McGann, "The Secrets of an Elder Day: Shelley after *Hellas*," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 15 (1966), 38-39.

[5] See F. Melian Stawell, "Shelley's 'Triumph of Life'," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, 5 (1914), 124; Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), p. 265; Kenneth Allott, "Bloom on 'The Triumph of Life'," *Essays in Criticism*, 10 (1960), 223-25 (all three of whom cite the *Intimations* Ode); and P. H. Butter, "Sun and Shape in Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*," *Review of English Studies*, N. S. 13 (1962), 44-45.

[6] Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 263-64. Bloom's criticisms of the "physical birth" interpretation are very much to the point: "If you hold closely to the text, . . . you will . . . face the disadvantage of not leaving Rousseau very much time in which to be overcome by his own heart alone, in which enough of Rousseau can develop so that Life will have something more than an infant in swaddling bands over which to triumph" (p. 264). For responses to Bloom, see Allott, 224; Butter, 44.

[7] Reiman, p. 60 and n.

[8] Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 323.

[9] William Hazlitt, "Shelley's Posthumous Poems," *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (London: Dent, 1933), XVI, 273. Hazlitt's review originally appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*, 40 (July, 1824).

[10] Letters of 25 June and 20 June 1811; The Letters of *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), I, 116, 110.

[11] Letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, 3 January 1811; *Letters*, I, 35.

[12] See, for example, his "Essay on a Future State" (c. 1812), *Shelley's Prose: or, The Trumpet of a Prophecy*, ed. David Lee Clark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954; corrected ed. 1966), p. 178.

[13] C. E. Pulos, *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1954), pp. 106-07.

[14] *P. W.*, p. 478.

[15] Note 6 to *Hellas; Ibid.*, p. 479.

[16] Peter Butter, *Shelley's Idols of the Cave* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1954), p. 84.

[17] Aeschylus, "Fragment 141," in *Aeschylus*, trans. Herbert Weir Smith (London: Heinemann, 1930), II, 467. Compare also Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, 11. 1206-09; Euripides, *The Daughters of Troy*, 11. 641-42, *The Children of Hercules*, 11. 592-96.

According to Mary, Shelley read Aeschylus' fragments on 10 January 1821, and Sophocles' *Trachiniae* on 15 January 1820 (*Mary Shelley's Journal*. ed. Frederick L. Jones [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947], pp. 145, 128). On 22 October 1821 Shelley wrote to Hogg, "I have employed Greek in large doses, & consider it the only sure remedy for diseases of the mind. I read the tragedians, Homer, & Plato perpetually"; and to John Gisborne, "I read the Greek dramatists & Plato forever" (*Letters*, II, 360, 364).

[18] Significantly, this drink often preceded a return to some new existence; cf. Plato, *The Republic*, X.621; Virgil, *The Aeneid*, VI.714ff.

[19] This hope for comfort at twilight also explains ll. 378-81, where the shape's sweet movement is likened to that of evening mist rising from a lake and being illuminated by the moon rising in the east directly behind it. Rousseau would like the shape to be for him not only a vision of passing dawn-beauty but also a promise of twilight-beauty.

[19a] Shelley would seem here to be developing and responding to Wordsworth's earlier use of this astronomical image in *The Excursion*. The Wanderer, speaking of varieties of natural piety in early modes of religion, discusses the Chaldean shepherd-astronomers: "The planetary Five / With a submissive reverence they beheld; / . . . — The imaginative faculty was lord / Of observations natural; and, thus / Led on, those shepherds made report of stars / In set rotation passing to and fro, / Between the orbs of our apparent sphere / And its invisible counterpart, adorned / With answering constellations, under earth, / Removed from all approach of living sight / But present to the dead; who, so they deemed, / Like those celestial messengers beheld / All accidents, and judges were of all" (IV.699-717). Cf. Virgil, *Georgics* I.242-51.

[20] I should point out that my argument in this subsection, while original, corroborates at least the most important part of Bloom's theory about the hierarchy of light in the poem. Bloom was the first to recognize that the stars, not the sun, are emblematic of the highest good in *The Triumph* (*Shelley's Mythmaking*, pp. 230-31, 269-70).

[21] The best explication of these patterns of imagery in the *Intimations* Ode remains that of Cleanth Brooks, "Wordsworth and the Paradox of the Imagination," in *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), pp. 126-33, 136-40.

Baker, p. 266n, notes that "Wordsworth's compass-pointing in the great ode is followed in *The Triumph of Life*. Wordsworth's youth daily travels 'farther from the east.' Like Rousseau, moving down the west running stream, Wordsworth's youth is attended on his way by a splendid vision."

[22] Bradley, 455, notes that after Rousseau suddenly sees his new vision of life he begins describing the scene not as a beautiful, forested valley but as a "wilderness' and "desert." Bradley visualizes this wilderness or desert as "the 'path,' 'track,' or 'way' (433, 459, 518, 535) along which the Triumph advances through the forest." I would suggest instead that the triumphal desert-path is part of the "new Vision never seen before" (411); as long as Rousseau remained in the valley of dream, the forest had simply not seemed to be a wilderness, and the desert-path had been invisible because unrecognized. Inversely, when he does at last see the world before him as a desert, it is because his own mind has "bec[o]me as sand" (405). Rousseau is losing his vision of nature's radiance just as Wordsworth did: "The things which I have seen I now can see no more" (*Intimations* Ode, 9). He is beholding the same things, the same scene, as before, but now they no longer seem the same.

[23] Butter, *Shelley's Idols of the Cave*, p. 70.

[24] Reiman, pp. 67-68.

[25] Reiman, p. 64, was the first to point out that "From Milton's description of Circe's son, Comus, . . . Shelley borrowed several features of his 'shape all light'." But while briefly acknowledging that Shelley's echo of Comus necessarily carries "ominous overtones," Reiman finds such borrowing only in the appearance of the shape's nepenthe, not in its effect.

Similarly preoccupied with the name and appearance of the potion, Baker (p. 267n) cites as a source Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, IV.iii.42-44. But this description of nepenthe, like Comus' dissembling description of his own potion, is of negative relevance, indicating all that the shape's nepenthe ought properly to be, but is not. Anxious to interpret the shape as a benevolent spirit, Baker could deal with the problem of the devastating effect her nepenthe has on Rousseau only by making the incredible assumption that Rousseau never actually drank from her cup at all (p. 267).

[26] Similarly, the condition of the damned sinners in Dante's *Inferno* represents the essence and fulfillment of their sins. Milton's vision here in *Comus*, and Shelley's throughout *The Triumph*, ultimately are both essentially Dantean.

[27] Stawell, 126.

[28] Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, p. 271.

[29] Cf. *Triumph*, 483-86; and see above, p. 431.

[30] Cf. *Hellas*, 729-32: "Revenge and Wrong bring forth their kind, / The foul cubs like their parents are, / Their den is in the guilty mind, / And Conscience feeds them with despair."

[31] Bradley, 442-43; Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, p. 271.

[32] Shelley's translation; "Matilda Gathering Flowers. From the Purgatorio of Dante, Canto XXVIII, ll. 1-51," l. 43 (*P. W.*, p. 729). Shelley goes on to translate Dante as calling Matilda one "who, if looks had ever power / To bear true witness of the heart within, / Dost bask under the beams of love" (11. 43-45).

[33] Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, pp. 254, 267, 271.

[34] Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (1961; rev. ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 359, makes this assumption, stating that the shape "represent [s] Wordsworthian nature." See also his *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 232.

[35] Of course Shelley could not have known of Wordsworth's affair with Annette Vallon, pursued only one year before Wordsworth first visited Tintern Abbey.

[36] This metaphysical *double entendre* also appears in *Alastor*, the Preface to which suggests that the more influences of the Power one imbues, the sooner one's life will be extinguished: in quenching one's spiritual thirsts with the Power's influences (flowings-in), one quenches one's flame of life as well. Hence the repeated images of moisture and fire in both Preface and poem, and hence also the appropriateness, though in a vastly changed context, of the Preface's closing quotation from Wordsworth's *The Excursion:* "The good die first, / And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust, / Burn to the socket!"

[37] For similar uses of the word in Shelley's poetry, see *The Triumph*, ll. 8, 276; *Charles the First*, II.40. I should note that my reading here is corroborated, so far as such evidence has value, by Shelley's earlier version of l. 243: "Could temper to the spirit."

For discussions of l. 243, see Bradley, 451-52, and Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, pp. 259-60.

[38] Bradley, 449-50. See my earlier discussion of ll. 416-33 (above, p. 427).

[39] Stawell, 108-09, has previously noted this parallel.

[40] Cf. a comment Shelley made on Rousseau in his "Proposals for an Association of Philanthropists" (1812): "Rousseau gave license by his writings to passions that only incapacitate and contract the human heart. So far hath he prepared the necks of his fellow-beings for that yoke of galling and dishonorable servitude which at this moment it [sic] bears" (*Shelley's Prose*, p. 67).

[41] Possibly, indeed, it includes only the much smaller number of those who, at the

first touch of spiritual corruption, spiritually or physically revolted against life. This group might include Chatterton, for example, and possibly even the Keats whose sensitive spirit, as Shelley once thought, received its death-wound from the *Quarterly Review*'s criticism of *Endymion;* but it would not include the Keats who died of tuberculosis, or, for that matter, Lucan or Sidney.

[42] Letter of 10 April 1822; *Letters,* II, 405. Shelley is allusively likening himself to Lucifer/Satan; cf. *Isaiah* xiv.12.

[43] The text at this point is imperfect, but tends to support my reading. At one time Shelley apparently wrote of "The ?two" who so put aside the diadem of earthly thrones, and in its final version 1.134 actually remains tentatively at "Were there; — of Athens & Jerusalem" (Reiman, p. 153).

[44] *Shelley's Prose,* pp. 282-83.